

Spencer Smith

To most, my first impression is not that of a warrior. In fact, since living in New York City, I cannot count the number of times passersby have unabashedly asked, “How’d you become cripple?” or given the backhanded compliment, “Good for you for being outside.” I have learned that many expect someone like myself to be homebound and dependent on others. Thankfully, my disposition is always to break expectations, flip impressions on their heads.

My muscle disease, Spinal Muscular Atrophy, did not strike all at once. It hampered me slowly across many years and I watched my dreams and independence slip away. As a child, I could run, jump, and swim with all my peers, but when I hit a growth spurt, I couldn't build the same muscle as others. I was told to move into a wheelchair, but I pushed back with all the fear and anger of an adolescent that wanted a chance at normalcy. When I did make the move, there was relief. In a manual chair I didn't have to strain just to walk down a hall, and I could still travel and explore the world with my friends.

There have been specific challenges along the way that I am proud to overcome. With aching muscles and atrophied joints, I pushed through my barriers to keep up with my peers: winning medals in Show-Me State Games, crewing a sailboat for Boy Scout High Adventure and tackling the sprawling city of London on a semester abroad. I wanted to forge new adventures, but the most difficult challenge that still arises are the stereotypes and false impressions people map onto me.

Specifically, I wanted to journey into the world of public interest work and direct services. While still in high school, I left home to attend United World College in New Mexico for a two-year program. In my second year, I discovered the value and challenge of leadership as the Program Organizer for CARE Unit, working in a Juvenile Violent Crimes Ward. Stepping into a room of juveniles held for armed burglary, assault with a deadly weapon, and sexual violence is quite the scene when you are only seventeen yourself. They measured me up and down, eyes on the rims of my wheels as they shared a smirk. It is enough to shake anyone's nerves.

I came into the experience seeking to impact personal and academic growth. I sought to break a chain of distrust these young people had developed from past experiences, but I first had to break their expectations of me. They immediately projected an otherness onto me that,

because of my wheelchair, I could not possibly relate to even general experiences of adolescence. They did not believe I could laugh at normal jokes, that I had a diverse knowledge of music, that I loved sports. But I rolled up cool as the other side of the pillow and I began by showing a genuine interest in their lives. We played domino games and argued over the best soccer player (of course everyone knows it's Messi). Before long, conversations on Tupac melded with critiques of Langston Hughes and card games turned into lessons on probability. I was proud not only to change their opinion of me as a peer and mentor, but also to form relationships that encouraged them to think about ways to overcome their barriers.

Years later, I was hired at a welfare office in Brooklyn to develop education programs and instruct vocational training courses. Every week, I again entered to awkwardly long gazes and doubt from new clients. While I had overcome every physical and emotional obstacle presented by my wheelchair, they could not see that. They only saw my wheelchair. There I was at an employment office, and instead of clients participating in my trainings, their first instinct was to ask if I needed to hire a Home Health Aide for myself.

This is not a challenge conquered through physical grit or creative problem solving like many others I have faced. This determination entails a strong and unbreakable knowledge of self. Each day I stood in front of the classroom of sometimes forty clients and provided curriculum I carefully prepared and believed in. But, unlike most of my peers in direct services, I additionally had to prove to clients that my muscle disease and wheelchair never prevented me from relating and empathizing with other adults. I straightened my posture, even under the stress of everyone's stares and preconceived judgements, and with my body language, humor, and confidence I continued to break through their impressions.

Agile. Strong. Fortified. I am none of these in their physical definitions. At face value, place me in a jungle and I might not breathe past the first night. Yet, in my young career in direct services, I have not suffocated. I was not eaten alive, and before long I was rolling in with bonafide Brooklyn swag. I am passionate about leaving an impact through public service, and I am now entering my second year of law school. Through school internships and clinics, I've worked as a tenant advocate in Housing Court and in youth re-entry services, and I continue to confront clients that do not believe someone in a wheelchair can assist them. I am motivated to break these impressions because I know first-hand the difficulty of overcoming barriers. Just as I needed support through my journey, I believe I can be that aide to many others. After working

with clients for even a brief period of time, I am confident they see a more accurate picture of what I represent. Purpose. Empathy. Determination.